Memoirs of Joseph S. Testa

(b. 1935, Buffalo, New York)

Edited by Matt Testa
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Preface

The following are personal memories. They are not researched but are my recalling of life situations and stories told to me by my family. I am writing this during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

For historical information I've attached an appendix that contains the genealogy information that I have. With that, I will preface my story by saying that I have had a wonderful life and cannot complain.

Grandparents

I was fortunate to have all four of my grandparents until I was 33 years old. As such, I got to know them well. My paternal grandparents, Joseph and Francesca (Fran, nee Battita) were wed in Palermo, Sicily, where my dad was born. Dad's recollection was that they came from Bagheria on the north coast of Sicily. The Palermo location is from the immigration records. Record keeping was not precise. My dad was given his choice of three different birthdays and he chose October 28. They immigrated through Ellis Island when my dad was two and a half. There is a plaque with Dad's name in Ellis Island. Records indicate that Grandpa came to the U.S. about a year before Grandma and my dad.

They migrated to be close to Grandpa's brother, Uncle Mike, who was living in Buffalo with his wife Grace and their two sons, Benny and Peter. Grandpa told me about how he and his brother bought a large parcel of land on the corner of Sheridan Drive and Niagara Falls Boulevard. This property would later become the Boulevard Mall. They had the property after World War I. Neither Grandma nor Aunt Grace would move there. The site was serviced by a horse-drawn trolley that made a once-a-day trip to Buffalo. (I was told this story when I drove Grandpa past the location. A great what-if.)

My mother's dad migrated from Sicily by himself at 16. He made his way to Palermo from Mussomeli and ended up in Boston. He said he had no idea how big the U.S. was or, for that matter, where Boston was. Here was a 16-year-old farm boy who spoke only a Sicilian dialect making the journey. He took a train to Buffalo to meet his sister and arrived with 50 cents in his pocket. (Many years later Mary Ann and I visited Sicily. It took us 90 minutes by car to reach Mussomeli from Palermo. Our bilingual driver said she could not understand the town dialect.) Grandpa crossed several language barriers as well as distance to become an American. I'm reminded that when he and Grandma were celebrating their 50th anniversary in 1961, the family wanted to give them a trip to Italy. They refused, saying that if they died on the trip they would be buried in Italy, and they are Americans.

Grandpa's mother, sister, nephew, and niece continued to live on the farm. He supported them through World War II. After living there for 40 years they sent a letter suggesting that Grandpa's roof was leaking. Grandma was not pleased. Years later, when I was in my twenties, Grandpa told me he was making a will and offered me the farm. I refused and said to give the farm to those living on it. He said, "What if I tell Grandma that I gave you the farm and you gave

it to my family?" I replied, "What if I kept it?" He said, "I knew you wouldn't. That's why I gave it to you."

Grandma Zuccaro (nee Piazza) traveled at 16 with her parents and three sisters to the United States from Valledolmo, Sicily. They landed in New Orleans and one sister stayed there. (We lost touch with the New Orleans branch except for one instance: after World War II, we were visited by a one-star army general who was a son of the New Orleans sister.) Another sister migrated to Akron, Ohio. We kept in touch with the Akron branch of the family. My mom and one of the Akron offsprings, Laura, remained close through the years. We would visit Akron by car with no AC or interstate highways, which was a real adventure and an all-day trip. As a kid I hated it. I do recall one trip when I was about 10. I was led by the adults to a couple seated under a grape arbor. They were Grandma's sister and her husband, my great-aunt and uncle. They were dressed in black and she was seated to his right and slightly behind. As the adults started to introduce me, he held up his hand and everyone fell quiet. He said he knew who I was and gave me a hug. I was in the family. A *Godfather* moment.

Grandma, her sister Rosalie, and her parents came to Buffalo. Aunt Rose was married at least three times. She was the one credited with giving one husband a file blade while in prison. She also hosted Saint Joseph's tables. She would collect small donations all year. What with my name, I was selected to process in with Mary and a Jesus doll. After many years she sadly told me I was too old for the role (hurray).

I do not know anything of Grandma's parents except that they were small even by Sicilian standards. My mom would recall sleeping with her grandma Margaret.

By an accident of fate my wife Mary Ann's paternal grandparents came from Mussomeli and knew my grandfather. When Mary Ann and I visited Sicily in 2002 we saw her family name,

Vullo, throughout the town, but I never came across Zuccaro. We think the name was an invention of the immigration officer's as Grandpa got to the U.S. We thought the name was an adaptation of *zucchero,* meaning sugar. However, while we were in Sicily someone suggested that it was an adaptation of the Arab word for squash. Therefore, my mom was either a "sugar-head" (Zuccaro-Testa) or a "squash-head."

My grandfather Testa worked for the city through the Depression. A humble job, but a job nonetheless. He rolled trash cans to the curb. How he landed a city job is unknown to me. My grandfather Zuccaro worked his entire life as a manual laborer on construction. He would come home exhausted. Grandpa would have one drink: a whiskey in the winter or a beer in the summer. While living on Dante Place, he was employed to build the Buffalo water-pumping station on Porter Avenue. The two sites were at least 5 miles apart, but Grandpa would walk both ways to save the five cents in car fare. He also told me that his route took him through the Irish district. He would walk with several Italians for safety. Grandma Z never talked about it, but she would wash bank floors on her knees after hours.

Both the Testas and the Zuccaros were hard-working people, the epitome of immigrant families. Each side had six children who survived to adulthood (see Appendix for family tree). They struggled to get them educated. Some made it through high school, but I was the first in the family to get a college degree.

Both families settled in what was called Dante Place, now the modern waterfront, which was a rough and poor place back then. Both bought houses on the same block of Spring Street between William and Clinton Streets. It was through this proximity that my mom and dad would meet.

There are a few other tales I would like to tell. Grandma Testa had a brother, Uncle Pete. It was told that during Prohibition he had a still under his back lawn. It blew up and he convinced the authorities that he knew nothing about it. My dad's cousin Joe was a barber, and during the Depression, business was slow, so he would buy eggs by the crate from cold storage, put on old clothes, and go door to door selling "farm-fresh eggs." My family were entrepreneurs well before Silicon Valley.

I was very close to my maternal grandparents, partly because we lived in the same building, but mainly because they were wonderful, loving people. I cannot think of a single negative to say about either of them. They and my parents were examples for me. They taught me how to live and I hope I've passed some of that down to my children.

Grandpa would sit on the porch with the neighbors' Irish setter, Maco. When Grandpa would take out a stogie, even before he lit it, the dog would move to the far end of the porch. Both were retired, Grandpa would say.

I spent many summer evenings on the porch with Grandpa. Grandma would come out and tell us it was getting late. Then she would show up with fresh coffee. Her coffee, by the way, could be used for roofing tar -- it perked for hours, or so it seemed. She was a great cook except for her coffee.

Over the years, if Grandpa ever got mad, he would mutter a word that is impossible to spell (phonetically, something like *su-MO-mu-lo*). When I got old enough, I asked Mom what it translated to. "Nothing," she said. "Just a way to let off steam without actually swearing."

There are many stories of my grandparents and I wish I could remember them all. A few come to mind. When I was attending P.S. 45, Grandpa and I would go to Mass together. One pastor harangued that if one went to public school, the child and the parent are doomed to hell.

After Mass, Grandpa asked me to wait while he went to talk to the priest. I often wished I could have been a fly on the wall.

Christmas was special at Grandma's. The entire family would gather the day before to prepare the feast, and dozens of us would spend the night together. What wonderful memories.

I wish my memories of my dad's parents were as warm. Grandpa was a long way from fuzzy. I was the first grandchild -- the Prince of Wales, or what could have been -- but I resisted visiting because I did not feel welcomed or, for that matter, loved.

One small story: While I was a freshman at high school, Grandpa was hit by a car and was in the emergency room. The hospital was nearby and I walked after school to see Grandpa, who looked at me and said, "What do you want?" I did not visit again.

The last time I saw Grandpa was to introduce him to my fiancee. We brought him a Father's Day gift. Even Mary Ann suggested when we left that she did not care to visit again.

Grandma was a bit better. She left Grandpa in the late 1940s after she discovered a woman in her bed. She moved out, got a job and lived alone for the next 20 or so years. She did not radiate warmth. Maybe I was comparing her to my other grandmother.

There is one positive story I recall. When I was 17, a young lady who was much more "advanced" than I made a pitch. I found out that Grandma visited her with instructions to leave me alone. She gave me a love that prevented me from changing my life (thanks, Grandma).

Grandpa Testa had one brother in Buffalo, Uncle Mike, who lived with Aunt Grace on Roosevelt Avenue. They had two sons, Benny and Peter. I don't remember much of Uncle Mike, but Aunt Grace was a lovely lady and, I might add, a good cook.

Except for Grandpa Testa, all of my grandparents died in their mid-seventies. I had four grandparents until I was 33. There is a photo of Maria with two grandmothers and two great-

grandmothers, as well as her mom. Grandpa Testa lived into his nineties. Who said the good never die?

Parents

My mom and dad met as neighbors. They lived one block apart on Spring Street, which was between William and Clinton near the east side of Buffalo. Both grandparents had moved there to escape the violence of Dante Place. Mom recalled that as a small girl she and her sister Mary witnessed a shooting. Her mom could not convince her that she had "seen nothing."

Both of my parents had a tough life. Dad would get up very early to sell newspapers on the docks and railroads. He contracted smallpox and survived, although it left him scarred. Of course, education was nonexistent. He somewhat made it through the fourth grade at School 1 on Busti Avenue. Mom graduated from the eighth grade at St. Columba at Hickory and Clinton, which was destroyed by fire in the 1960s. She was offered a high school scholarship but turned it down to take on a full-time job. Mom spoke wistfully through the years of not going to high school. At age 14, she used her older sister's working papers to get a full-time job with H-O Oats. She also worked for a candy vending company. She would save the slugs that were deposited and give them to her brothers to buy candy. She said the owner was amazed at all the slugs in use.

Mom was a bit of a firebrand. When she was a teenager her mom arranged for a Jamestown barber to visit and look her over. Her brother Greg tipped her off and she did not come home. When she did, her mother was mad. Mom told her, "If he's such a great find, divorce my father and you marry him." Grandma threw an iron fry pan at my mom as she fled.

A great story of the growing-up days on Spring Street was when my uncle Sam left a note on the back door that said the key to the house was in the milk box. Effective only on illiterate burglars.

When my folks were dating and they went to a movie, one of Mom's young brothers would go along. He would accept a candy bar and sit elsewhere in the theater.

Mom and Dad were married on June 2, 1934, in St. Brigid's Church on Eagle Street. (The church was destroyed by fire in the 1960s.) Their reception was in the church hall with a cook hired to feed their guests. Typical gifts were water glasses because the Depression was full on. Their honeymoon was a rented house across the street from Dad's family.

Dad was working when he could at Hewitt Robins. He told me of a 39-cent paycheck for a week's work. He took it to the grocery store and was offered a dollar by a stranger. He took the dollar.

Early in their marriage, my folks owned a Model A Ford, cream colored, I think. They went on a picnic to Chestnut Ridge Park and the car could not make it uphill with passengers. Everyone got out and either walked uphill or helped push the car. After fixing a flat and getting there, they discovered they had no hot dogs for the picnic.

I was addicted to the Model A and its rumble seat. Dad could not go out without me in the seat. Remember, this is before seat belts, so I'm lucky I did not bounce out.

Like everyone, my mom and dad had some peculiar traits. Dad particularly. He was a great father but with some idiosyncrasies. The following are a few that come to mind.

When Dad was 81 he had his first of three heart attacks. His doctor said he would meet him at Millard Fillmore Gates Hospital. I received a call and went there. Dad was lying on a gurney with an angry doctor wanting to know why he drove himself to the hospital. His reply,

"How am I going to get home?," showed resolve. The doctor asked for his medical history and I said he didn't have one. Dad corrected me: "In 1934 I had an auto accident in Dunkirk, New York, and had my left arm set." I apologized for not knowing that, as it was before I was born.

Dad loved sweets -- candy, pies, anything sweet. He would enjoy a full fruit pie after dinner. He also ate a large watermelon each week. He received a box of chocolate-covered cherries, ate the whole pound, and then said they were too sweet. Of course, the tale of his eating several pounds of fresh cherries, pits and all, leading to being "plugged up" is well known in our family.

Dad had a habit of wanting to get rid of things. That led to combining things. After his death we found a bag of fertilizer in the garage. We applied it to the rosebed. Days later we found that Dad had combined grass seed with the fertilizer.

My dad was always hard working. When I was about 15, Dad decided to sell Christmas trees and I would help out. He bought a load, rented a parking lot space, and stood out in the cold. The trees were not pruned and sold for 75 cents. One night a large car came up and offered me 25 cents. I told the driver where to place the tree. Dad said I should be kinder to customers. We did sell some trees but had plenty left. Fortunately my uncle Dan had a dump truck. I did not ask where the trees went. I'm not sure if we made a profit but we never did it again.

Dad had an uncanny means of saving things, never in what we would call logical order. Easter decorations ended up in the basement with his tools. He never forgot where he put things but no one else could ever find them. He liked to be tidy. A great tale is my mom coming home with greeting cards. She set them on the kitchen table and went to the restroom. My dad came in from outside and cleaned up the kitchen, putting the cards in the bedroom. Mom didn't even know Dad was home and went nuts looking for the cards.

Dad spent his entire working career at Hewitt Robins, working 46 years on a swing shift. He planned to retire in October, but the plant had a strike that April. He tried to retire early but that was refused. The operation went bankrupt and closed the plant, denying Dad his pension. We hired a labor attorney and collected $25,000 after expenses. This was concurrent with the ERISA law guaranteeing pensions. Dad took $5,000 and gave it to me. I refused to cash his check but it shows his generosity.

While Mom was feisty and loving, she was not quite as interesting as Dad. She had her moments. One rainy afternoon she offered to share her umbrella at a bus stop. The little boy was appreciative. On the bus he sat next to Mom and in a deep voice offered to buy her a drink. She quickly realized he wasn't a boy.

Mom was a good cook, as you might guess. She could turn the simplest items into a great meal. Not much meat but great eats. Her pies were great. She would can from April (pineapple) through October (tomatoes, eggplant). I had the chore of washing the canning bottles. We enjoyed the fruits of her labors all year round. Dad would take me to pick the fruits and Mom would put them up, rather like Little House on the Prairie. It took effort but it was great.

Early years

I was born about noon on November 18, 1935, in a hospital on the corner of Elmwood and Edward in Buffalo. Mary Ann was born in the same hospital six weeks earlier. Dad would say that when I was brought home, the blanket had tears and repairs.

I was a real pain when I was young. At age two I lost my left eye. I was sitting on my mom's lap when a young boy jabbed me with the metal end of a fly swatter. Not long after that I spilled hot water on myself. The hospital said there was no need to care for me, as I would die

soon, but Mom and Dad brought me home and here I am. A few years later I had a bad case of measles, leaving me deaf in my left ear. Mom would work in the farm picking and I would stay with Dad and my grandmother. One Sunday, Dad took me to visit Mom. I was a preschooler and so excited to see her that I ran across a horseshoe pit and got whacked over my right eye.

Poor Mom and Dad must have wished I had never been born. Maybe these misfortunes led them to call me "my Joey," a nickname my sisters have always enjoyed teasing me with.

When I was about three I noticed a huckster selling tomatoes. I took my little wagon, went into Grandpa's yard, and picked his green tomatoes. I went to the curb and tried to sell them. At this time, raising veggies was not for fun but for canning. When Grandpa came home, my mom told him of her son's misdeed. "Did you hit him?," he asked. Mom said yes. He replied, "They're my tomatoes. Don't ever touch him!" Mom said he never would be so lenient with his own children. Grandchildren get away with anything.

I have but one vivid memory of my grandparents' house at 217 Spring Street. When I was four, Mom's youngest brother, Charles, died of polio. Mom said it was the first time she heard the word. They held his wake at home. Years later I described the setting and the house correctly. It must have made quite an impression on me.

We moved to the Lovejoy section, 95 Schiller Street, when I was four. We developed a close relationship with a family, the Syracuses, who lived nearby. The parents became like a third set of grandparents to me, their children close friends with Mom and Dad. Their grandchildren who were my age remained my friends into adulthood.

I've been told that I attended kindergarten at P.S. 43. Mom would walk me there and I would run home before she got back. There was a naptime at school and I could not understand

why I should go to school to sleep on the floor when I could stay on my own bed. Mom admitted I had a point.

I attended P.S. 43 through the fifth grade. I don't recall much except for a fourth-grade play. I so wanted to be the frog, but instead I was cast as Prince Charming and had to kiss a girl.

We moved to 94 18th Street in April of my fifth grade. Grandma and Grandpa Z had bought the house and we moved into the upper flat. My folks decided I should finish the fifth grade at P.S. 43. At age 10 I would take two buses across town, about a 40-minute trip each way. I could not imagine doing such a thing today. Lunch every day was with the Syracuses.

Schiller Street was a kid's delight: open fields, railroad tracks, and plenty of kids. When we moved I thought my world had ended.

My sister Fran was born early during World War II while we lived on Schiller. I now had the first of my three baby sisters. It was wartime and I remember Fran's stroller made entirely of wood, including the wheels, without rubber tires.

When Fran was very young she took sick and I overheard the doctor say she needed orange juice. I took it upon myself at age seven to find fresh oranges. Unfortunately I failed to tell my folks. Several hours later a neighborhood search found me with a bag of oranges. I really drove my poor folks nuts.

While on 18th Street I had a second sister, Lucy, whom we called Lu. She was born near Saint Lucy's Day, December 13. Mom accepted the name because she did not want another Josephine, after her mother. (As an aside, my grandmother Testa was born on Saint Lucy's Day and would not eat cake or bread on that day, staying true to Sicilian tradition. When we were in Sicily years later, we heard the myth that in the 15th century a famine hit Sicily. A grain ship ran

aground in the harbor and the Sicilians were too hungry to wait for milling or baking the grain, so they ate the whole wheat berries, *cuccia*, which we still do.)

As I finished P.S. 45 I had another sister, Barbara. I would tease her that I didn't have a graduation party because of her. Years later, when I had children of my own, Barbara presented me with a large "Congratulations, P.S. 45" cake to keep me quiet.

I was accepted at Buffalo Technical High School, a citywide school on the near east side, at Eagle, Clinton, and Pine Streets. I studied engineering prep. I decided to become an electrical engineer at age 12; I still don't know why. Buffalo Tech was all male at that time. I was the last graduating class from the old building. The school is now called Hutch Tech and is located on Elmwood Avenue. And they now admit girls!

The school served me well. When I went to UB Engineering School I had every necessary prerequisite and then some.

Starting work

When we moved to 18th Street I got a paper route that I kept until I turned 16. Then I got a job as a part-time clerk at the Loblaw food market at Niagara and Maryland Streets. I continued to work at Loblaw's until 1956, with various full-time summer jobs. My summer jobs included produce manager, bakery stock hauler, construction, electrical contractor, and my first professional job the summer of 1956 at Westinghouse. I was assigned the task of making a solid-state auto ignition system, which I did. One funny event: I had a complex system that took many minutes to reach equilibrium. One day I thought I saw it smoking, so I turned down the system, only to find my eyeglasses were dirty. I heard about it from every engineer in the plant.

There were a few special memories. The summer before I started at UB, I applied for a busboy job at the University Club on Delaware Avenue. They told me in no uncertain terms that they did not hire Italians. Years later I received an invitation to become a member. I enjoyed replying.

The same summer I was a produce manager. One afternoon the head of the markets came in and tried to convince me to stay and not go to college. While he was talking, his local subordinate stood behind him shaking his head. Years later I ran into the headshaker and thanked him for his concern.

In 1953 I tried to get a summer job as a draftsman. The HR department asked me if I was going to college and I said no. Before I got home he had called my mom, who proudly said I was going. I apologized to him. He understood and said to look him up when I graduated -- a good life lesson.

I wanted to attend RPI but could not afford it. UB was a private school and cost the same as RPI, but I could live at home, so I applied only to UB. Who knew? I was accepted. Engineering was a small discipline: about 400 students. When I graduated in 1957, there were 35 of us that did it in four years. UB's first engineering class was 1949.

I was able to earn my way through school while living at home, something that is unfortunately out of reach for today's students. Tuition and fees the first semester came to $175. They rose to $300. Books were nearly as much. I was making 50 cents an hour at the supermarket.

Years later, as president of the Engineering Alumni, I addressed the graduating class. I was also a member of the general alumni board when North Campus was initiated.

I graduated with a B.S. in Electrical Engineering in 1957, becoming the first in my family to go to college. I realized that the party I was given was not for me but for the family. My grandparents were immigrants who sent their kids to high school. I was the next generation and went to college: the American dream. There is a great photo I treasure of me in my gown, Grandpa in my cap, and Dad with a big smile. Years later, when my oldest grandchild, John, graduated from Buff State, we re-created the photo with John, his father Tom, and myself.

After working the summer of 1956 at Westinghouse I was offered a job at their Baltimore office. I'd be a field engineer and make a lot of money, with no taxes while working overseas and a per diem. I took my first airplane ride to the interview. After months on the job in training, I was asked where I'd like to be assigned and I said Western Europe. I was told to go to Norfolk, Virginia, to work on destroyers, so I quit. "You can't do that," they told me, and I asked why not. "You will go overseas in 15-20 years." To save face they offered to transfer me to Westinghouse Buffalo. I took the offer and the company paid to relocate me.

I worked there from November 1957 to March 1958. Sylvania Electric had built a new engineering lab on the corner of Wehrle and Cayuga. I applied and began working on the electronic countermeasure (ECM) for the B-58, a medium-range high-speed bomber. As the ECM job phased out in 1961, I helped to design a launch code for the Minuteman ICBM.

I grew tired of working for a large company in the spring of 1963 after talking to an instructor at UB, Wilson Greatbatch, who designed the insertable pacemaker. I took his advice and applied to Sierra Research down the street at 479 Cayuga. Sierra had 11 employees plus a small number of part-time production people. The company was a spinoff of Bell Aerospace, which formed in 1957. I was the first professional offered a job from a résumé. They would offer me a job when they received a contract in late June. I was not about to sit around for two months.

I had been teaching math and electronics in the evenings at Erie Community College. I took a full-time teaching position to start in the fall. Now I was about to have two jobs. I had taken and passed the state professional engineering exam after returning from Baltimore. I took a job as an assistant town engineer in Cheektowaga and designed the storm sewer under Union Road. Sierra called me to start in July and I said I already had a job: teaching. They suggested I work full-time until the fall and then do as many hours as I could at my hourly rate, and I accepted. In fall 1963 I taught part-time, worked at Sierra nearly 40 hours a week, and tutored Professional Engineer applicants. Mary Ann sat me down: "You will be reduced to one job in the next two weeks or else!" I kept two.

During this period Mary Ann was in a medical study program. She loved to tell how she answered the question, "Where does your husband work?" Her answer: "Today, next week, or long term?"

Mary Ann

In September 1958 I was heading to the Checkerboard Restaurant at Utica and Main (now a metro station) for my Friday rarebit. I was accompanied by a school friend, who suggested we stop at a Catholic dance -- Cross and Scroll, whose members had to be 21 years old and single. They were meeting just one block from the Checkerboard on Main Street and Riley. I reluctantly agreed.

I danced with the lady who was to become our maid of honor, Jean Amico. Then I met and danced with a Miss Mary Ann Vullo. I never danced with anyone else after that.

We agreed to go out in one week, as we both already had dates planned that first weekend. On our first date we saw the movie *Madama Butterfly*, which became our standard. We

went to Foster's Supper Club on Delaware Avenue. Three months later, in January 1959, I asked her to marry me and gave her a ring before she changed her mind. I asked her dad for her hand and we agreed to wait until his back was well before we married, which we did in April 1960.

Mary Ann and I began to realize that although we had just met we had many common friends. Her brother Bill had been my pledgemaster at UB. (I did not finish the pledge period because I had no time, but I later joined the engineering frat Pi Lambda Tau.) She and I lived six blocks apart yet went to different schools, churches, and colleges. She invited me to join her at a friend's wedding, where I knew almost as many people as she did.

Mary Ann met my extended family at a cousin's baptism. While I spent some time with her folks, she never had the chance to do so with mine. I do recall playing bridge with my future inlaws. As I was used to playing with colleges and work, I accused my mother-in-law-to-be of not knowing how to bid. She was very gracious but we never played again.

After I proposed in January 1959, I told my mom I was getting married. "To who?," she asked. "Why, Mary Ann, of course." She was upset. "I never talked to her or met her family," she said. My grandfather came in and assured his daughter that Mary Ann came from a good family. He knew her paternal grandparents, who were also from Mussomeli, Sicily. Mom quieted down. After she left, Grandpa read me the act: I was wrong! But Mom got to know Mary Ann, and she and Dad loved her.

The day after I announced my getting married, Mom and Aunt Mary were going to a ladies' card game and I was providing the transportation. We passed a jewelry shop on Main and Genesee Street and I said I would visit after I dropped them off. "Go with him," Mom told her sister. "He is going to buy a ring." Aunt Mary knew the shop owner. She had me select what I wanted and then leave. She negotiated half price with two free wedding bands included. She then

asked for a gift for bringing in a customer. I went to the gift area and selected our first wedding gift: gold-leaf glasses. I gave Mary Ann the ring the next day and it fit perfectly.

I don't know why my folks were so surprised. I had brought Mary Ann to my grandmother Z's for Christmas dinner, the first and only girl I had brought to their house.

We went out or talked every day in the months leading up to our wedding on April 23, 1960, at 11 a.m. We were married in Holy Angels Church on Porter Avenue, near the music hall. (The church closed in summer 2020.)

We had found a quartet that we enjoyed, the John Radel Quartet, with piano and vibes. We visited them every week at the Union Casino at Walden and Union. They would play "The Folks That Live on the Hill" every set as their second song and dedicate it to us. We asked them to play for our wedding. They were music educators and played at the club at night. They had never played for a wedding. But since we were having an afternoon wedding, they accepted.

Our reception was at the Hotel Lafayette following the wedding. It was a ground-breaking afternoon reception with dinner and dancing. I can't say I remember the details but we received raves from our guests. After photos we spent our first night in the free honeymoon suite at the hotel. It had twin beds! But we used just one. We kept our location a secret from everyone except our best man, George Randazzo, who drove us to our apartment to change and to the hotel. Later that evening there was a knock and we were presented with a bottle of champagne from George.

We attended morning Mass at St. Michael's on Washington Street and taxied to the airport to spend a week in New York City. The newest airplane in the sky was the Lockheed Electra: great and fast, except a wing would fall off occasionally. My new wife insisted we not fly that aircraft. I booked it anyway, because how would she know? As we boarded, we saw the

name was proudly printed on the door. “This is not the way to start a marriage,” I was told. I changed the return flight.

We had five days together in Midtown Manhattan. We saw the original cast in *My Fair Lady*, toured NYC on the bus lines, visited museums, and more. Mary Ann saw an ad for Johnny Mathis at the Copa. We’d have a fancy dinner and go hear Mathis. I really don’t know how we paid for the night we had, since we had no credit card. We didn’t wash dishes, so we did it. Years later we would spend our 50th anniversary in NYC. The finances were better but I had the same beautiful lady.

We had an apartment on Princeton Court behind the University Plaza. I was taking grad courses at UB. At this time the Main Street Campus was the only one; the North Campus was built six or seven years later. Mary Ann taught fourth grade at the Kenmore system at Green Acres Schools. When she became pregnant she had to resign. She was working on a master’s in education, which she finished in 1966.

We bought the house on Briarcliff in Cleveland Hill, Cheektowaga, and moved in February 1961, two weeks before Maria was born. It was a nice little house. Mary Ann found it and called me to look at it. I agreed it was just right: three bedrooms, one bath, kitchen, another room, and a half basement with a one-and-a-half-car garage, near Sierra, good-size yard. We paid $13,200, or $72/month, FHA. The first day we were in the Briarcliff house the outdoor thermometer read minus-19 degrees F. Obviously we needed a new thermometer. (Not so.) I was doing some work for Sylvania at the Niagara Falls air base and it was damn cold.

I moved to Sierra just before Margaret was born in January 1963. Was she conceived while I was at Sylvania or at Sierra, our doctor asked. Sylvania got the bill for maternal care.

Career

My first six months at Sierra were brutal. We were trying to build, install, and demonstrate a station-keeping system, which allows formation flying in all weather. I worked, went home for dinner, and went back to work. We succeeded and the system became a bread-and-butter source for many years.

The president took Mary Ann and I for a lobster dinner. She told him, “Don’t think a dinner will compensate for six months of his life.” (Gulp.) The next day he congratulated me on having such a great wife behind me!

About this same time the rocket scientist Wernher von Braun came to speak at the retirement from Bell Aerospace of Dornberger, who was von Braun’s Nazi boss during World War II. We were invited to share a table with Sierra’s officers. Dinner was late but the drinks were not. Later on, the Trap and Field Club had a magician for entertainment. Mary Ann asked, how many rabbits, one or two? She saw two and we left.

I stayed with Sierra for 25 years, going from a part-time engineer to general manager with 1,100 reports. I traveled almost every week and Mary Ann was very supportive. In 1983 the president, Sherwood Calhoun, asked me to take a nine-month sabbatical and attend the Harvard executive MBA program so I could become president when he retired. Shortly after the offer, Sierra was sold to LTV, who told me that while I was qualified, their policy was to bring in someone from the outside. The Sierra president was fired and a new man was brought in. I assumed it was the end for me, but they made me a senior VP of LTV and gave me a raise. I stayed on as general manager until I resigned in September 1987. (I must add that this story has not been told and I hesitate to tell it now, as it sounds self-gratifying. However, without it my resignation from Sierra does not make much sense.) When I resigned, I was tired and decided a

six-month rest made sense. LTV gave me a full six-month package: salary, health care, car, and country club. I thought about brokering the sale of Sierra. I had dinner with the president of Bell Aerospace in Niagara Falls. He was not interested in buying Sierra but offered me a very attractive job: number two in the company, salary better than Sierra's. But I was not interested. He persisted and Mary Ann said why not? I started at Bell in December 1987 and I became president in 1990. When I took the Bell offer, the HR people at LTV sent me a dozen white roses and suggested I should smell them.

I had planned to retire at age 55 before Matt was born, but I moved that to 57 after his arrival. I thought of leaving in early 1991, but Textron, Bell's owner, wanted to integrate the division with another. There were 1,500 employees to be moved, retired, or let go. I could not walk away. I was able to close the division down and retire on January 2, 1993. Textron offered me choices of other divisions but I was ready to move on. I had plenty to do. As Mary Ann said, I didn't retire; I just stopped earning money.

I was always busy, and when not working at home or on my job I took on several volunteer activities. It was these activities that made my retirement seamless. I had several positions with the Town of Amherst over a span of about 20 years: conservation council, government studies, zoning board of appeals, and planning board. I became interested in scripture and took the four-year biblical studies program, which led to a 15-year teaching career. I enrolled in a Master of Theology program at the Diocesan Seminary. I went evenings and passed all the in-class programs. I failed to write my seminary paper, on the topic of workplace spirituality, when it conflicted with my downsizing of Bell. Of course, there were numerous books and other activities. Mary Ann was always supportive of my busy life.

Family

Maria was born on February 15, 1961, at Millard Fillmore Gates hospital (no longer standing). Mary Ann's mom and I got to see Maria for the first time at about 4:00 p.m. A nurse held her behind a glass partition because I could not see my wife for 12 hours after birth. I rushed to my folks to tell them the news and returned to the hospital at about midnight. Mary Ann was nursing our daughter. I can still see the scene: it is one of my moments in life. Years later we were on a Marriage Encounters weekend and were asked to recall a highlight. We both separately chose that moment. I had a copy of the song "Maria" from *West Side Story* playing when we came home.

Margaret was born on a brutally cold January day. On a Friday the doctor told Mary Ann it could be any time. I put chains on our car and Maria went to stay with Mary Ann's parents. I shoveled the driveway clean for two days. On Monday we agreed that Mary Ann should go to her mom's, which was very close to Children's Hospital. I returned from dropping her off and decided it was a good time to paint the kitchen. After I was covered in paint, my father-in-law called to say *now*. Margaret was born the following morning.

True to the era, I was put in a waiting room, and hours later a nurse put a pink button on me and said everything was fine, come back in 12 hours. I returned with flowers and was told to put on a gown to visit. I tried to add water to the flowers and I pulled the alarm. Mary Ann always said the look on my face with staff running to her room was one of the funniest moments. We took our daughter home on a clear, still, black night.

Life was good but we did not have much money. I came home one Wednesday to find Mary Ann in tears. She had taken our one-year-old Maria to buy rubber pants. She had 49 cents,

but with tax the pants cost 51 cents. I offered help when I got paid on Friday; I did not have two cents.

Years later when Mary Ann mentioned this to her dad, he wanted to know why she didn't ask for help. I was proud when she said we did it together.

We got a bit richer by 1967 and contracted to build 100 Sundown over the coming winter. We moved in April 1968. It cost $30,000 with $1,200 in extras and had four bedrooms, an attached garage, a family room, a living room, a dining room, and nearly 2,000 square feet. Wow.

We built in Amherst to be in the Williamsville school district. Mary Ann talked to the principal of Maple West before we signed on. The two girls and their future brothers all went through the Williamsville schools. The district was very good to us and to Maria's own children, John and Laura.

Joe was born the day after the first Earth Day, on April 23, 1970. It was our 10th wedding anniversary. When Mary Ann suggested we go to Children's Hospital, I brought along flowers delivered that morning. The nurses were impressed because no one had ever arrived with flowers. Mary Ann said I was a cheapskate for using the flowers for two things at once. I said it was good planning.

We had bought a dining room set and it was delivered a week after Joe's birth. Mary Ann said they tried to deliver a server, which we hadn't bought. I had to tell her it was a surprise gift for her.

We were planning to be empty nesters soon. The two girls were in college and Joe was in middle school. We were 45. I had gone on a fishing trip but returned early to attend a friend's

Lebanese baptism for his grandson. On March 4, 1981, our second son was born. Our friend said he was Lebanese.

We were both surprised and nervous when we learned Mary Ann was pregnant. Older parents don't always have healthy babies. The rate of Down syndrome rises by a factor of 10.

Matt was born healthy and alert. I was in the delivery room -- a far cry from my experience with the first three births. There was one glitch, however. Older parents tend to have female babies and we had chosen the name Cara. Obviously that was not going to work. We took most of the day to get to Matthew, meaning "gift of God."

Matt may have delayed our plans but he is a joy. We are blessed with all four great kids.

When Matt was about three he would not put his seat belt on and I said the policeman said he had to. Later, when he would not buckle up in the swing set, his brother used the same line. Matt replied, "Policeman says I have to sit, policeman says I have to buckle up. Policeman pain in *ahss*." Mary Ann accused me of poor training.

Retirement

Mary Ann and I did travel and go on vacation, sometimes without the kids. Early in our marriage we would spend weekends in Toronto without the kids, who would stay with their grandparents. We took several cruises and traveled overseas. Starting in 2000 we would spend the month of March on Florida's west coast, in Venice. As I recall, we took several Caribbean cruises, visited Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Greek islands, Rome, London, and Paris, cruised on the Rhine, and took many trips within the U.S. All were great. We wanted to cruise South America but never made it.

We celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary with a family picnic hosted by our children. It was a great turnout with family and friends from around the country. Our son-in-law, Dick, arranged our song, “The Folks Who Live on the Hill,” for him to play and all eight grandchildren to sing.

We decided to revisit our honeymoon and went to New York City. This time we had a bit more money. Two Met operas, a show, museum visits, and more. We had a suite on the 12th floor at Central Park South overlooking the park. Mary Ann asked but I never told her how much it cost. The first car I bought, a new 1959 Chevy, cost $2,300. The eight-day suite (50 years later) cost $2,500. We had a great time, although we knew her health was coming down on us.

While I’m reminiscing about anniversaries, I should mention our 55th in 2015. It was a family dinner. It was to be our final get-together. Mary Ann died three months later. She looked great and appeared to be well, though she was living on transfusions.

In January 2009 Mary Ann took a normal blood test. She was found to have a low platelet count. She became a hematologist’s patient. Bone taps revealed a problem with her bone marrow. One week before our 49th anniversary, she was tested at Roswell and told that she had myelodysplastic syndrome, a form of leukemia for which there is no cure. A bone marrow transfusion was the only possibility. Mary Ann did not qualify because of her health and age.

She began a watch-and-observe period, with weekly medical visits and occasional blood transfusions. In June 2014 she was admitted to the ICU at Roswell Cancer Center. She spent several months in the hospital through 2014 and 2015 and the remainder at home, with visits to the hospital almost daily. She was living on transfusions because her bone marrow had failed. Since white cells cannot be transfused, she became neutropenic and very susceptible to infection.

We even learned to do infusions at home to save some trips. I recall one five-day period that had seven medical visits.

In August 2015 she came down with pneumonia. We went to the ER at Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital. She was admitted. An MRI confirmed the pneumonia and growths near her spine. The following Sunday her pain was severe. She went into hospice care. I kissed her for the last time at 3:15 a.m. on Tuesday, August 11, 2015. The nurse woke me at 4:00 a.m. to say she had died.

Mary Ann was waked at Amigone and given a funeral at the Newman Center on Saturday, August 15. The Assumption of Mary: how appropriate.

During one of Mary Ann's hospital stays, I had walked to the St. Jude Center, a Catholic chapel. The resident priest joined me and after a few minutes offered me a brochure describing pastoral care. I had neither the time nor the interest.

After Mary Ann's death I went to Roswell to thank the doctors and staff. Somehow I found myself with the director of pastoral care. She said that the training program was offered every two years and was about to begin the first week of September (the next week) and I was too late to consider it. After some 30 minutes she suggested that I had just had my entrance interview: I was in the program. I'd have to get a health exam and letter from my pastor. I'd be starting the next week.

I began training one week after Mary Ann's death. I still don't know if I agreed because of empathy for each victim or because I thought it was healing for myself, or both.

My class of five met every Monday. We made rounds, gave verbatim reports, had conferences, and attended lectures. We met at 1:00 p.m. and ended at about 9:30. I graduated in April 2016.

I was offered a position at Roswell, which I maintained until 2019, when I transferred to Millard Suburban Hospital because it is closer to home. I also began end-of-life ministry in 2017. I would be assigned terminally ill patients and I would stay with them and their family for one year after death. I had 18 such cases when I resigned from Roswell.

One of the training lectures focused on health care living facilities. It struck me that most of the residents and staff were female. The men might benefit from a male visitor. I applied at Park Creek assisted living facility and I am still there every Wednesday.

As I write this in April 2020 I am still living in our house on Sundown Trail. I visit hospitals on alternate Sundays and Tuesdays. I also visit four men at Park Creek at 1:00 every Wednesday afternoon.

Children and grandchildren

I have been blessed with a wonderful life -- great parents, grandparents, an incredible wife who was a perfect mother. I have eight children: four by birth and four by marriage. And eight grandchildren, who are reflections of their grandma (and their parents).

Maria and her husband, Tom, live nearby. They have been caring and supportive of me, particularly since I've been alone. Their two children, John and Laura, are the best. I recall the first time we saw John. Mary Ann and I were called and went to Sisters Hospital. I strained to look at John's hands and feet to check for Down syndrome symptoms. Mary Ann called me nuts.

When John was little, his mom brought him to Virgil Avenue to visit his great-grandparents. He took great pleasure in running from front to side door, ringing the doorbell to "drive that old man nuts."

John looks and acts much like his uncle Matt. They are both great young men. John is my tech geek and keeps my modern world working.

Laura, now a grad student in social work, is a beautiful and intelligent young lady who is now actively helping those in need through her concern as a social worker. A favorite story: When she was a few weeks old, Mary Ann went to the gym and I was alone with the baby. Her folks had recently moved to 60 Monroe in Williamsville and had inherited a security system. I was told they had discontinued the system. In any case, to entertain the baby I used the keypad to make music. It turned out the system was still active. An alarm went off, the police and fire departments appeared, and the security people wanted to know the PIN. I called Maria, who gave me two options and roared in glee at my predicament. Security did not want two codes; they wanted one. I guessed correctly. The alarm stopped and the police and firemen left. I took a pair of wire cutters and attacked the system.

Margaret and Richard are also caring and attentive. I wish I could count how many music events I have attended with the two of them and their three children. I've enjoyed every one. Margaret has been kind to be my power of attorney and backup financial support. I have designated Maria as my medical surrogate and Margaret as my POA. A great combination.

Their oldest child, Elizabeth, who has always had a pretty smile, was born 10 days after her cousin Laura. At the time I planned to go to a convention in Minneapolis. Joe and Rebecca were living there and Matt was coming with me. Mary Ann refused to leave her two very pregnant daughters. Laura was born July 2 and I left July 3. I returned July 9 to be around for Elizabeth's July 10 entry into the world. What timing.

A fond memory of Michael is his walking around the back yard conducting an imaginary orchestra with a twig. Now he is a grad student in musical performance. Amanda, my youngest

granddaughter, has just entered college. She is planning to become a physical therapist. She is not only bright but a good dancer.

All three of the Goss children play musical instruments. Along with their musical parents I call them the family Von Goss.

Joe and Rebecca. I first met Becky in London while she and Joe were attending the University of London. I recall Joe debating which grad program he would choose. Then I heard that his then-"friend" Becky was going to the University of Minnesota for law. Joe announced that he too was heading north. It was not a surprise.

I was visiting my best man, George, in El Paso right before Joe and Becky married. George and I were walking in New Mexico after the death of his wife and then I went directly to Minneapolis. John was very young but discovered poached salmon at the party.

Joe and Becky's oldest is their daughter Camille, now a grad student at the University of Oklahoma. A very bright, talented, athletic young woman. Camille had a summer job in 2018 at a Buffalo medical center. It was a treat to take my granddaughter out for lunch during work hours.

Their next oldest is Theo, a vibrant, enthusiastic young man. He is a student in the Virginia university system. When Theo was 16 he spent a week with me in Buffalo. I tried to cram as much local lore into him -- Maid of the Mist, Old Fort Niagara, Chef's restaurant, Shark Girl -- and he left with a T-shirt that proclaims, "My city smells like Cheerios."

The youngest guy, Jamie, is in high school. Jamie has been fascinated by French and has spent several summers in a French immersion camp in Minnesota. He is the youngest of my eight grandchildren.

Matthew and Karen. Two more beautiful, attractive kids. I cannot believe the legacy Mary Ann left me. Matt and Karen appear to be ideally suited for each other in temperament, interests, and intelligence. They were married one month after Mary Ann died. A wonderful way to resume life. I enjoyed their wedding in a park more than I can say.

The bottom line is I have an absolutely great family.

Reflections

After Mary Ann's death I questioned what was next for me. I decided to continue living in the family house on Sundown, even with its two stories plus a basement. I can handle the stairs and I like the location. I can walk to a library, food market, pharmacy, and bank, each about one mile from home. I'm near my church, the senior center, and my two daughters. I enjoy taking walks on the Ellicott Creek Trail. From home to the trail flagpole and back is 3 miles, which takes about one hour. I'll stay here as long as I can.

A few months after Mary Ann died I chanced to sit next to Jean Duffy at church. Jean is a widow. Our two couples knew each other casually over the years. I asked Jean for a walk. We became friends and I dare say companions. We share meals and entertainment -- music, films, etc. When asked how long we've been married, we answer 115 years! Jean was married to Dick for 60 years and me to Mary Ann for 55.

Coincidentally both Dick and Mary Ann were born on October 2, but in different years. We have celebrated their birthdays with a joint Mass at the Newman Center. We also had a Mass and brunch with both families at Brookfield Country Club. It was a way of introducing the families to each other.

Jean's companionship and my family have kept me on an even keel (at least as even as it can be). I'm comfortable and relatively healthy for my 84 years. I cannot ask for any more. Although the Covid pandemic has modified life, I can't complain. I do miss the Philharmonic, travel, and group get-togethers. Except for those restrictions I am getting along well.

I could write much more but I hope I've given my family a brief overview of my life in the 20th and 21st centuries.

God bless, keep safe, and you have my love.

Dad (Joe)

Appendix: Family Tree

Joseph S. Testa, born about noon, November 18, 1935, Buffalo, New York, in a hospital at the corner of Edward and Elmwood.

My family

Parents

John A. Testa, born October 28, 1909, Bagheria, Sicily. Immigrated to the U.S. through Ellis Island, 1912.

Catherine M. Zuccaro, born August 5, 1914, Silver Creek, New York.

Married June 2, 1934, in Buffalo, New York.

Sisters

Fran Cultrara, born July 31, 1942.

Lucy (Lu) Nearhood, born December 1946.

Barbara Leak, born June 8, 1949.

Paternal grandparents

Joseph Testa, born September 28, 1882, Palermo, Sicily.

Francesca (Frances) Battita, born December 13, 1892, Palermo, Sicily.

Married in Sicily. Joseph immigrated to the U.S. in 1910. Frances (with a two-and-a-half-year-old son) immigrated in 1912 through Ellis Island.

Maternal grandparents

Vincent Zuccaro, born October 18, 1887, Mussomeli, Sicily. Immigrated to U.S. in 1903 through Boston.

Josephine Piazza, born August 27, 1892, Valledolmo, Sicily. Immigrated with family to U.S. in 1908 through New Orleans.

Married in Buffalo in January 1911.

Uncles, aunts, and cousins

Testas:

- John (my dad) was the oldest.
- Benny drowned at age five or six.
- Michael. Children: Joe (from first marriage); Mickey, Linda, and Jerry (second marriage).
- Catherine (Kay) Totaro. Daughter: Maria.
- Joe. Daughter: Fran.
- Angeline Sandusky. No children.

- Bertha (Mary) Oliveri. Children: Patricia, Richard, Louis, and Marty.

Zuccaros:

- Mary Mallia. Children: John, Vince, JoAnn, and Josie.
- Jenny died at age two.
- Catherine Testa (my mom).
- Gregory. Children: Vincent, Philip, and Gregory.
- Gioachino (Jack). Children: Vince, Josie.
- Josephine Spano. Children: Angeline, James, Lucille.
- Salvatore. Children: JoJo, James, Charles.
- Charles died of polio at 13.

I am the oldest grandchild on my dad's side and second-oldest on my mom's side (JoAnn is oldest). All my aunts and uncles are deceased.

Mary Ann's family

Mary Ann Vullo, born October 2, 1935, Buffalo, New York. Same hospital as Joe.

Parents
Vincent Vullo, born March 24, 1899, Buffalo, New York.
Rose Ann Russo, born January 30, 1901, Buffalo, New York.
Vincent and Rose married in Buffalo.

Brothers
Vincent (Vince), born 1930, Buffalo, New York.
William (Bill), born 1933, Buffalo, New York.

Paternal grandparents
Salvatore Vullo, born February 2, 1863, Mussomeli, Sicily.
Josephine Bonfante, born 1868, Mussomeli, Sicily.

Maternal grandparents
Vincent Russo, born 1869, San Fele, Italy.
Maria Antoinette Bochicchio, born 1868, San Fele, Italy.

More details in the family Bible.